

Focus on Bristol Bay: What is EPA studying and why?

May 2011

In February, EPA announced a scientific assessment of the Bristol Bay watershed to understand how large-scale development would affect water quality and habitat in the Bristol Bay watershed, the habitat of one of the largest salmon populations in the world. While the Bristol Bay watershed is composed of nine major rivers, EPA will focus primarily on the Kvichak and Nushagak river drainages, the primary areas in the watershed open to large-scale development.

We launched this study in response to concerns from federally recognized tribes and others who petitioned the agency. Our assessment aims to answer three primary questions:

- Is the Bristol Bay salmon fishery the one of a kind, world class fishery that it is depicted to be?
- What are the potential impacts to Bristol Bay's salmon fishery from large-scale development activities such as hard rock mining?
- Are there technologies or practices that will mitigate these impacts?

The nuts and bolts of the assessment

What is EPA looking at, exactly?

The assessment will examine whether certain types of large development projects will have unacceptable effects on fish populations and other resources in the watershed, including the Bristol Bay salmon fishery. Within this assessment the agency will:

- Describe the ecological and economic significance of Bristol Bay salmon resources locally and in the North Pacific Ocean, as well as their significance to Alaska Native culture
- Compare Bristol Bay salmon resources to other major salmon resources in North America
- Describe the ecosystem characteristics in the Kvichak and Nushagak watersheds that support the fish resources and the risks of large-scale development to those characteristics
- Investigate practices that could minimize ecosystem risks and resulting risks to fish populations
- Assess the success and failure rates of these mitigation practices

EPA has a team of scientists with expertise in fisheries biology, mining, geochemistry and anthropology. These experts are reviewing a wide range of existing information compiled by the State of Alaska, federal resource agencies, tribes and scientific institutions from around the world.

The sources we are using include peer-reviewed research published in scientific journals, agency staff, tribal elders and input from other experts.

Once EPA has compiled the information, the agency will submit its findings for an external scientific peer review process. EPA's report will be reviewed and critiqued by scientists outside the agency who are not involved and do not have a stake in Bristol Bay issues. EPA may do additional analysis based on their input.

This assessment will inform EPA's future decision-making to protect water quality, preserve the fishery and ensure sustainable development in Bristol Bay.

Outside the lab: Human interest and dependence on Bristol Bay

EPA recognizes that the objective of this scientific assessment will have significant implications for people—those living in the watershed and others who depend on its natural resources for their livelihood or way of life. Decisions regarding development in Bristol Bay will affect native villages, Alaskans, the health of salmon and wildlife in Bristol Bay, the local economy and beyond.

Our scientific process is being conducted side-by-side with a public process—we plan to share our findings and progress throughout the course of our assessment in a series of community outreach efforts in Alaska.

This is also a collaborative undertaking. We are relying on tribal consultation, traditional ecological knowledge, federal agencies, state agencies, public comments and industry input to develop a cohesive, fully-informed assessment.

We are confident that this collaborative and transparent scientific process will answer many questions about the Bristol Bay watershed and efforts to protect it.

For More Information

- | Web site:
- ← E-mail:
 - Join the Bristol Bay listserv to get regular e-mail updates about EPA's work by sending an e-mail message to bristolbay@epa.gov or clicking on the link on the web page.
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